AN ANALYTICAL STUDY ON INDIA'S RELATIONS WITH ASEAN IN CONTEXT OF THE PRINCIPLE OF ASEAN CENTRALITY IN 21st CENTURY

A SYNOPSIS

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INTRODUCTION

South East Asia is located to east of India, south of China and north of Australia. It comprises of 11 countries, 10 of Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) - Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, and East Timor. This region has served as a major link for trade, migration and cultural exchange for centuries due to its strategic location between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

The geographical proximity of the region with India has facilitated a deep historical relationship marked with various economic and cultural interactions. For instance, Hinduism and Buddhism, both originating in India, spread across the Southeast Asian region. India's epic Ramayana inspired Thailand's national epic Ramakien and Cambodia's epic poem Reamker. If we look in architecture, temples like Angkor Wat (Cambodia) and Borobudur (Indonesia) reflect Indian influence. In the same context, the shared language and scripts can also be noticed. For e.g., 'Suvarnbhoomi' is the term that referred to Southeast Asia.

Moving ahead in time, the relationship between India and Southeast Asia was further strengthened after the period of colonization. India's struggle for independence inspired the Southeast Asian nationalist movements. Also, India supported anti-colonial movements of Myanmar, Indonesia and Vietnam. Furthermore, during the Cold War era, when Globe divided into two major blocs- US and USSR, the region of Southeast Asia became a battleground for rivalries. However, India remained equidistant from the two world orders yet maintained good relations with the Southeast Asian nations.

After the Cold War, Southeast Asian nations took steps to enhance regional economic growth and political stability while ensuring mutual respect for sovereignty. The period also observed rapid economic growth, particularly in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia, which transitioned into thriving economies through industrialization, foreign investment, and export-driven strategies. For instance, Singapore focused on attracting foreign investments, developed key industries like electronics and finance, and built strong infrastructure and skilled workforce. Additionally, these countries worked towards a better trade connectivity and expansion of markets.

FORMATION OF ASSOCIATION OF SOUTH EAST ASIAN NATIONS (ASEAN) –

The years of colonial oppression had left Southeast Asian economies underdeveloped, with weak infrastructure and limited industrialization. There were challenges like rebuilding of economies and addressing widespread poverty while also handling external pressures like the Cold War and spread of communism.

In this context, regional leaders tried to establish a platform for dialogue and collaboration among the newly emerged independent nations. Accordingly, Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore formed the 'Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)' by signing of the Bangkok Declaration in 1967. The organization was a step forward for collective growth and political stability.

Singapore had played a crucial role in the formation of ASEAN. Due to its capitalist orientation, Singapore emphasized on free market policies, infrastructure development and trade, that closely aligned with the objectives of ASEAN formation to promote growth, peace and mutual support.

Later in 1984, Brunei also joined the ASEAN. Subsequently, with the end of the Cold War , Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia also joined the organization. Furthermore, the introduction of ASEAN Charter in 2008 provided a legal status and institutional framework for ASEAN. It enabled ASEAN to enter into international agreements and sign treaties as a formal entity.

INDIA AND ASEAN-

During 1980's India was facing balance of payment crises, coupled with the restrictive License and Inspector Raj systems. As a step to deal with economic challenges, India adopted the LPG (Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization) reforms in 1991. With the new policy of economic liberalization, India aimed to explore its economic ties with ASEAN countries. In the same year, India announced 'Look East Policy' to build good relations with ASEAN in terms of trade and investments. The formal engagement of India and ASEAN began in 1992 as a 'Sectoral Dialogue Partner'. Further, in 2010, AIFTA (ASEAN- India Free Trade Area) came into effect.

Another advancement in India-ASEAN relations came with the introduction of India's 'Act East Policy' in 2014. It aims to enhance India's strategic, economic, and security relations with ASEAN countries. The mutual collaboration expanded to include broader areas such as maritime security and defense cooperation. The military exercises like MILAN, SIMBEX and AIME (ASEAN – India Maritime Exercise) can be noted in this context.

Furthermore, India-ASEAN trade relations have also grown significantly, with India benefitting from ASEAN's resources and ASEAN gaining from India's services sector. ASEAN as a group is one of the major trade partners of India and it comprises 11% of the India's global trade. The key exports of India to the ASEAN region include petroleum products, pharmaceuticals, leather and electronics. On the other hand, India imports palm oil, plastics, electric equipment and timber. Besides, India and ASEAN have also prioritized connectivity projects like the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project in order to enhance trade partnerships.

However, India- ASEAN trade relations still face challenges like trade deficit, non-tariff barriers and limited participation in high-tech manufacturing. India's trade expansion in the region has been further affected due to competition from China and other regional players. Also, initiatives like India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway have faced delays due to bureaucratic hurdles, funding issues and security concerns in conflict-affected areas in Myanmar.

Despite these hurdles, both India and ASEAN continue to focus on resolving issues and fostering a more balanced, mutually beneficial relationship. Through strategic engagement with ASEAN and beyond, India aims to strengthen its position as a major global player. As, **S. Jaishankar** says, ASEAN has emerged as the gateway to east for India. Also, India has supported ASEAN's stand for a peaceful and rule-based order in the region.

PRINCIPLE OF ASEAN CENTRALITY –

The term "ASEAN Centrality" was first introduced with the ASEAN Charter of 2008. ASEAN nations recognized the importance of ASEAN as a key organization for maintaining peace, stability and security in the region. ASEAN Centrality was introduced to promote regional integration through political, economic, socio-cultural and security cooperation. It focuses on reducing inequalities within the region by alleviating poverty and narrowing the development gap among the member countries. The principle of ASEAN Centrality focuses on the role of ASEAN to act as the driving force for regional cooperation and stability in the ASEAN region. It formalized the ASEAN's commitment to lead the dialogues and engagement with the external powers, while ensuring the interests of the member countries.

The ASEAN Centrality is a multifaceted concept that works on geographical, institutional, diplomatic and economic dimensions. Geographically, Southeast Asia is situated at a strategic location that links trade and maritime routes connecting East Asia with South Asia and the Pacific region. The central location makes the region a hub of global commerce and also increases its significance for maritime security and connectivity. This increases the responsibility of ASEAN as a leading regional organization to maintain peace and stability in the region. If we look at the institutional dimension, ASEAN centrality refers to strengthening of its internal mechanisms by promoting consensus-based decision making and policy coordination. It ensures effective dispute resolution and governance, making ASEAN a stable and credible regional organization. Furthermore, the diplomatic dimension relates to the role of ASEAN as a neutral and inclusive forum where diverse nations can engage in constructive dialogue and negotiation. This allows member-states along with the external partners to collaborate on addressing major geopolitical issues and conflicts resolutions. While on the economic front, ASEAN centrality focuses on establishing Southeast Asian nations as a regional hub for trade, investment and economic integration. This prioritizes intra-regional trade, foreign investments, and economic ties with external partners.

Importance of ASEAN Centrality-

The post-Cold War witnessed a gradual shift in global geo-politics from Atlantic Ocean to Asia-Pacific resulting from the rise of middle powers in the region like China, Australia, Japan and India. The region of Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean became a hub of economic expansion. The increase of trade and the development of maritime connectivity lines contributed to closer integration of the region, which later emerged as Indo-Pacific (confluence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans). This change in geo-politics and geo-strategic alignment in this region was quite evident. The new alignment and economic expansion in the region created opportunities for collaboration to reduce poverty and to enhance living standards for millions of people belonging to the region. Being at the central location, it became crucial for Southeast Asian nations to engage in developing economic and security architecture of the region. ASEAN's role came to the forefront in promoting stability, prosperity and peace for the people of Southeast Asia as well as the larger Indo-Pacific. Consequently, ASEAN emerged as a hope for its stakeholder countries, acting as a promoter of economic growth, a platform for discussions on regional peace and stability, and a honest broker within the strategic environment of competing interests.

Significance of ASEAN centrality in changed strategic equations in Indo-Pacific-

In recent times, a debate on ASEAN Centrality has gained platform due to the changing strategic equation in the Indo-Pacific region. The centrality of ASEAN is now being seen in the context of Indo-Pacific as ASEAN is strategically located in this region. At present, Indo-Pacific is one of the most volatile regions in terms of trade and maritime connectivity lines. The region facilitates maritime trade routes especially through South China Sea and Strait of Malacca. Almost 90 to 95% of world trade is being operated through this region. Also, the territorial disputes and China's assertiveness has added to the strategic position of the region. The China's initiatives like the One Belt One Road (OBOR) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) have gained significant momentum between 2008 and 2013. This underlines China's strategic intent to expand its control over Asia, particularly in Southeast Asia. China has continued deploying its naval power amid its territorial claims of South China Sea. It has increased its influence in the region, raising security concerns. China's disputes over the Paracel and Spratly Islands in the South China Sea involve territorial claims against Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Taiwan. For instance, there were clashes between the ships of Vietnam Chinese vessels in South China Sea. Economically, the debt trap diplomacy of China has also increased its influence, resulting in the fear of debt dependence and sovereignty loss in the Southeast Asian nations.

At this stage, the role of ASEAN becomes crucial for the stability of the region. ASEAN, being one of the most influential organizations in this region has more work to do. In this context, ASEAN acts as an international dialogue and discussion forum. ASEAN facilitates discussions for the

countries that are engaged in Indo-Pacific and tries to draw consensus among them. However, the issues like Sino-US rivalry, territorial claims of China and India's increasing economic interests have emerged as major challenges for ASEAN to deal with. In this context, promotion of peace and stability in Indo-Pacific becomes central part of the principle of ASEAN Centrality. Consequently, ASEAN will have to prove its bigger role in context of the consensus building among the member nations in order to maintain the openness and inclusiveness of the region while also ensuring its peace and stability. ASEAN needs to be more vocal on the regional and global issues. To achieve this, ASEAN needs to strengthen its governing body with a bigger role of Security General and its secretariat along with prioritizing decision-making based on majority rather than requiring the approval of every member country. In the long run, ASEAN should come as a bigger face for the whole region and should be seen as a vocal organization for its domestic and global issues.

The emerging challenges to ASEAN Centrality-

The aim of ASEAN is to be the central driving force in regional politics and economies. However, its ability to maintain this position is increasingly challenged by the growing influence of major powers like China and United States, as well as internal divisions within ASEAN itself. This raises doubts on whether it can effectively lead and set agenda for the region.

Key points about why ASEAN centrality is questioned:

a) Influence of External powers:

The rising influence of China and United States in the Indo-Pacific has overshadowed the leadership of ASEAN as an organization. The countries in the region are directly engaging with these major powers instead of relying on ASEAN. Besides, India is also involved in bilateral engagements with countries like Singapore, Vietnam and Philippines, while it sees Myanmar as only its neighbor rather than seeing it more as member of ASEAN. This undermines the reputation of ASEAN as an efficient organization that can work for interests of its members.

b) Disunity among ASEAN members:

Internal issues like Myanmar crisis can cause disagreements among the member nations. This hinders the ability of the organization to provide a unified response to the issue.

c) Silence on Major issues:

ASEAN has restrained from taking a strong stand on its domestic issues like Myanmar military coup, South China Sea dispute, territorial claim of China and global issues like Ukraine crises. This projects that ASEAN has been unconcerned about the regional and global issues while only focusing on trade and economic engagements.

d) Unequal Economic Development:

There has been gaps in economic development among the member countries. As a result, their demands and interests are varied, making it difficult to reach a consensus on regional policies.

e) Problems in Institutional Framework:

The decision-making mechanisms have not been robust enough to effectively manage regional issues which is essential to maintain its centrality. For instance, the annual summit of ASEAN is chaired by the member countries instead of its secretariat. Also, the secretary general has a limited role. Further, the decisions are taken by building consensus and not on majority basis. This results in difficulty to reach decisions as member countries have diverse interests.

Furthermore, the rivalry of US-China in the region has affected the ASEAN's collective decision-making. For instance, Cambodia and Laos align closely with Beijing, prioritizing their economic ties above the regional stability. The aligning of member-states with major powers affects the ability of ASEAN to take a neutral stand.

Despite these challenges, ASEAN Centrality remains crucial for Southeast Asia's peace, stability and economic growth. The ASEAN2023 discussion states that ASEAN must strengthen its centrality to emerge as a solution for the region. By uniting members and engaging external powers, it can uphold its identity as a stabilizing force in the Indo-Pacific. The region relies on ASEAN- led frameworks like the East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) to provide a platform for dialogue and cooperation. Also, initiatives like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) emphasizes ASEAN's role in driving economic integration and fostering interconnectivity. Also, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) has recognized the ASEAN's centrality in Indo-Pacific affairs, and sought closer engagement with ASEAN nations to establish a rule-based order in the region.

Different countries and scholars have varying views in this context. There is a global concern for ASEAN to strengthen unity and take a more prominent stance on security of the region. **Kamala Harris**, at the US-ASEAN Summit of 2023, highlighted ASEAN Centrality and its role in the Indo-Pacific Outlook.

In context of India, the principle of ASEAN centrality aligns closely with India's 'Act East Policy' and its Indo-Pacific strategy. A strong ASEAN ensures India's access to Southeast Asian markets, supports connectivity projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, and reinforces regional frameworks where India can assert its role in the Indo-Pacific. ASEAN's neutrality also complements India's vision of a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific, particularly in countering China's dominance. The centrality of ASEAN is crucial and should be preserved.

It is essential to explore how China's increasing assertiveness and major power rivalries impact ASEAN centrality. The key issue of ASEAN centrality in the Indian context should be explored

through the lens of its economic growth and security. India is committed in upholding and maintaining the ASEAN Centrality. India's accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in the early period of ASEAN-India diplomatic engagements, institutional mechanisms like ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMMP) exemplifies India's respect and value for ASEAN centrality. India follows the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries which has its foundation in the non-alignment movement and NAM 2.0 as well. India seeks multiple engagements with ASEAN through its centrality. There is a solid foundation in defense and security partnerships between India and ASEAN in the arenas of non-traditional security issues which ranges from health security to cyber security and from geo-economics to water resource management. Indian foreign policy towards ASEAN Centrality is based on its national identity and interest. There are multiple engagements with ASEAN, like in trade and commerce and bilateral defense partnerships with countries such as Vietnam and Philippines. India also recognizes the centrality of ASEAN to its Indo-Pacific strategy because of the India's growing economy in the region and its concern for the maritime security. India prefers to promote openness and inclusiveness for Indo-Pacific. India has been a peace-loving country since past history, and so promotes cooperation rather than military engagements.

On the same page, India and ASEAN may take coordinated approach in dealing with persistent and conventional security issues where they are immediate stakeholders and can augment their defense relations by elevating the intensity of their diplomatic relations. Not only between their foreign policy establishments but also with more regular interactions such as between their armed forces and navies, joint military exercises like SIMBEX and CORPAT and various defense deals. India can play a leadership role for ASEAN to motivate the organization for multiple engagements and active collaboration. ASEAN is also important for India in its near future, particularly in areas like bilateral defense relationships. On the other hand, India can help Southeast Asian nations that are aiming for arms modernization.

The emergence of Indo-Pacific has provided India with that window to look at the world through maritime prism and India is also cautious about the geo-political rivalries in the Indo-Pacific especially between US and China and other issues like the recent Russia-Ukraine war. India is well aware of the implications of the direct warfare. Therefore, India has taken a well calculated approach in responding to US-China rivalry and Russia-Ukraine war. The recent initiative SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) justifies India's position not only in the Indian Ocean but also in the entire sphere of Indo-Pacific. The major interest of India in ASEAN centrality is driven from its motivation to promote trade and commerce with ASEAN, enhance maritime security, address challenges arising from China's growing influence in the region, uphold UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea) and advocate for a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific. Despite challenges in India-ASEAN relations and ASEAN's tilt toward China for economic interests, preserving ASEAN's centrality will be beneficial for India's national interest in the long run.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is ample of literature available on this topic which have been reviewed. The relevant literature which has been taken for the study can be categorized in two thematic views:

1. A broad study which has been done on South East Asia and India – ASEAN Relations.
2. Literature on concept of Principle of ASEAN centrality, in which there are three categories of views:
    a. Scholars who see ASEAN centrality as a misconceived term because it is not necessarily created but accepted by ASEAN
    b. Scholars who suggest ASEAN centrality to play a bigger role to maintain peace of the region, or else its centrality is questionable.
    c. Scholars who supported ASEAN centrality in context of the strategic importance of the region.

1. *Ashok Sajjanhar* in his distinguished lecture titled *"From Look East to Act East: India's growing engagement with ASEAN and Beyond"* (2018) shares his views on India's deep historical connections with Southeast Asia, the challenges faced in the past, and the positive impact of the Look East and Act East policies. He highlights the growth in trade relations with ASEAN and emphasizes the importance of continuing India's Act East approach, especially given China's increasing influence in the region.

2. *Simon Tay* in his *International Studies Center lecture* (2020) suggests that to maintain ASEAN centrality in the context of the BRI and Indo-Pacific, ASEAN should uphold its integrity and sovereignty by adopting a unified stance and not aligning with any major power.

3. *PM Narendra Modi,* at the *21st ASEAN-India Summit and 19th East Asia Summit* in Laos (2024), reaffirmed India's commitment to ASEAN centrality and a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific. He highlighted India's 'Act East Policy', growing trade ties, and connectivity projects while aligning India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative with ASEAN's vision. He stressed on maritime security and adherence to UNCLOS. He laid forward India's strategic intent to deepen partnerships with ASEAN for regional stability and prosperity.

4. *S. Jaishankar* in his book *"The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World"* (2020) emphasizes ASEAN centrality as crucial to India's position in Indo-Pacific. He acknowledges ASEAN's stabilizing role in the region and highlights India's commitment to ASEAN-led mechanisms like the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the ASEAN-India Dialogue Partnership. Further, he also argues that ASEAN centrality aligns with India's Act East Policy, which seeks to deepen economic, strategic, and cultural ties between India and Southeast Asia.

5. *Ambassador Elizabeth P. Buensuceso* in her book *"ASEAN Centrality: An Autoethnographic Account by a Philippine Diplomat"* (2021) describes that ASEAN centrality is not just a theoretical concept but a practical principle guiding the organization's interactions both internally among member states and externally with global partners. She further illustrates how ASEAN Centrality is reflected in various diplomatic engagements and decision-making processes. She also discusses the challenges and opportunities ASEAN faces in upholding its central role amid evolving geopolitical dynamics.

6. *Mohd Faheem* in his chapter titled *"Role of ASEAN Centrality in India's Indo-Pacific Strategy: Prospects and Challenges"* that appeared in the book *"ASEAN and Regional Actors in the Indo-Pacific,"* (2023) highlights that India's Indo-Pacific strategy aligns with the ASEAN's centrality. He argues that ASEAN plays a crucial role in ensuring a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific, aligning with the India's interests. He notes that India supports UNCLOS as the legal framework for resolving maritime disputes, particularly in South China Sea, where ASEAN nations also adhere to the international law. Therefore, he says that India and ASEAN align their interests through maritime cooperation and diplomatic engagement.

7. *Khaw Guat Hoon* in her article titled *"Recent Developments in China – ASEAN Relations"* (1979) suggests that China is a strong supporter of ASEAN and has long been interested in Southeast Asia. One of its goals in the region is to persuade Southeast Asian countries not to align with its rivals. She says that China's interactions with ASEAN were influenced by its internal political developments, regional security concerns, and strategic interests in Southeast Asia.

8. *Vibhanshu Shekhar* in his article titled *"India – ASEAN Relations: An Overview"* (2007) says that India and ASEAN share deep cultural and historical connections. With a combined market of 1.5 billion people, ASEAN views India as a key player in shaping geopolitical developments. He also discusses the benefits of the Look East and Act East policies, while addressing challenges like India's share in ASEAN's global trade which is just 1 percent and the drawbacks of sectoral FDI capping.

9. *Rodolfo C. Severino* in his article titled *"ASEAN and the South China Sea"* (2010) highlights the conflict in South China Sea as a major security issue, with China seeking regional supremacy as it views the expanse of water as a potential threat to its security. He states that the issue involves the concerned countries, not just ASEAN as an organization and China.

10. *Asif Ahmed* in his article titled *"India – ASEAN Relations in 21st Century: Strategic Implications for India"* (2012) mentions that India is well-accepted by ASEAN nations due to the absence of border or historical disputes and its lack of security risks to the region. He says that India's strategic initiatives align with ASEAN's objectives to foster a stable, prosperous, and interconnected region.

11. *Rahul Mishra* in his article titled *"China in India's South East Asia Strategy"* (2013) explains that global politics has shifted from Europe to Asia in the 21st century, with the rise of China and

India making Asia increasingly significant in world affairs. He says that China's BRI and assertive maritime claims have influenced India's engagement strategies, leading to a more proactive approach in strengthening ties with Southeast Asian nations.

12. *R. M. Marty M. Natalegawa* in his article titled *"The Centrality of ASEAN"* (2017*)* says that it is crucial for ASEAN to maintain its centrality. He says that ASEAN's centrality allows it to serve as a platform for dialogue and cooperation, facilitating engagement with major powers and contributing to a more stable and prosperous region.

13. *Amitav Acharya* in his article titled *"The Myth of ASEAN Centrality"* (2017) views the term "ASEAN centrality" as often misunderstood. He highlights that it is not a purely noble or distinct idea, but rather a term closely tied to several other concepts such as ASEAN being the leader, driver, intellectual hub, architect, nucleus, and fulcrum of the region. He also emphasizes that ASEAN centrality is not solely about the organization itself, but involves the interests of external powers. Acharya suggests that ASEAN's central role is influenced by the broader balance of power, with its position being shaped by the involvement of major global stakeholders.

14. *Karthik Nachiappan* in his article *"India-ASEAN Relations: Riding and Transcending the "Indo-Pacific" Wave"* (2021) examines the evolution of India-ASEAN ties, focusing on security, economic, and strategic cooperation within Indo-Pacific. He highlights the India's shift from bilateral engagements to active participation in regional security, especially maritime security. However, he says that India's economic influence in ASEAN remains weaker than China's. He further puts forward the need for deeper collaboration between ASEAN and India to strengthen India's role in the Indo-Pacific region.

15. *Muhammad Waffaa Kharisma and Sampa Kundu* in their article titled *"ASEAN-India Cooperation in the Next 30: Towards Comprehensive Strategic Partnership"* (2022) emphasizes that Indo-Pacific's growing strategic importance has strengthened ASEAN-India relations, positioning both as key regional actors. Their shared strategic interests create significant potential for deeper cooperation. By enhancing defense diplomacy, security collaboration, and practical partnerships, they can effectively address regional challenges and build stability in the Indo-Pacific.

16. *Gurjit Singh* in his article titled *"Whither ASEAN Centrality"* (2023) says that ASEAN moves towards US for security issues while approaches China for its economic interests. This reflects its strategic dilemma in the US-China rivalry present in the region. He further says that China's aggressive actions in South China Sea since 2012 have weakened ASEAN unity, delaying decision making and preventing a unified response. Additionally, the key forums like ARF and EAS have worked only as discussion forums without enforcement power. Another major issue that causes ASEAN centrality to suffer is that it is chaired annually by a country and not by the ASEAN Secretariat. He puts forward that the ASEAN Secretary General should be given a greater authority so that he can collaborate closely with ASEAN chair and ensure continuity, which a disunited ASEAN struggles to achieve.

17. *Guangyu Qiao-Franco, Ales Karmazin and Michal Kolmas* in their article titled *"The Indo-Pacific and Next Phase of ASEAN Centrality"* (2024) describes that ASEAN's role extends beyond setting agendas, as it is a key regional organization. But its centrality is challenged by current global dynamics. A potential solution is to leverage its position to ease tensions, ensuring major powers have a vested interest in maintaining its centrality.

18. *Mohit Anand* in his report *"India-ASEAN Relations: Analyzing Regional Implications"* (2009) notes that trade with ASEAN has increased to USD 95 billion, but India's trade deficit with ASEAN has also gone up to USD 10 billion. He says that India is unable to compete with China's growing trade in the region.

19. Jeffrey Ordaniel and Carl Baker in their report titled *"ASEAN Centrality and the Evolving US Indo-Pacific Strategy"* (2019) examines the role of the ASEAN within the context of the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy. He identifies key areas for enhancing the US-ASEAN partnership, including addressing non-traditional security issues and strengthening maritime security. He lays down the role of ASEAN framework in promoting the rule of law and good governance, and deepening economic integration of the region.

20. United States National Intelligence Council Report titled *"Mapping the Global Future"* (2020) states that China and India are set to become major powers, with China's assertiveness causing its neighbors to rethink strategies. India's "Look East Policy" has strengthened its ties with Southeast Asia, driven by historical relations.

PROBLEMS TO BE INVESTIGATED

- What is the historical and contemporary relation of India and ASEAN?
- What is the concept of formation of ASEAN and its centrality?
- What is the relevance of ASEAN centrality for India in present times?

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- To theoretically analyze India- ASEAN relations- a historical and contemporary study, and understand the concept of ASEAN centrality.
- To analyze the relevance of ASEAN centrality in context of India and to understand challenges and potential of India and how India will use it in the context of ASEAN.

MOTIVATION

The research is motivated by recent debates on the question of ASEAN centrality amid newly emerging political rivalries in the South East Asia. These include China's assertiveness, the trade war between China and the US, Indo-Pacific security concerns, South China Sea disputes, maritime security, India's territorial security, and challenges to open, free, and inclusive trade in the region.

ASEAN is an established and successful organization after the European Union and question of its centrality makes this topic more concerning. Moreover, the relationship between India and ASEAN is historical, with India referring ASEAN as the "Gateway of the East." ASEAN still has a major role to play, and India has a direct influence in it.

Since this topic is less explored through the lens of India, it provides a strong motivation to conduct in-depth research.

HYPOTHESIS

- ASEAN centrality is important for India's growth and its broader foreign policy.
- India has huge potential to engage positively with ASEAN.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the subject. While quantitative data aids in presenting measurable trends and patterns, the research places a greater emphasis on qualitative aspects, employing historical and analytical methods. By combining these approaches, the research aims to achieve a balanced analysis that is both data-driven and conceptually insightful.

TOOLS TO BE USED IN COLLECTION OF DATA

The research will use both primary and secondary data sources. In primary data sources, the research will cover personal interviews, questionnaires, reports, newspapers, national and international conferences, and group discussions. For secondary data, it will cover articles, journals, recorded interviews and previous data from relevant sources. By synthesizing these diverse data sources, the research aims to present a deeper understanding of the topic.

TENTATIVE CHAPTERISATION

Introduction
Chapter 1- India and the rise of ASEAN in South East Asia
Chapter 2- India-ASEAN in Contemporary times
Chapter 3- Emergence of ASEAN Centrality in the new architecture
Chapter 4- ASEAN Centrality and India's Foreign Policy in Contemporary times
Chapter 5- Understanding the Challenges and Opportunities for India-ASEAN Cooperations
Conclusion- Research Findings and Suggestions

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The region of ASEAN has become a key part of the newly emerged Indo-Pacific area, which is one of the most volatile regions in the current era, particularly in the context of global maritime trade. Recently, China has expanded its influence in this region through its naval power, profitable trade with ASEAN countries, territorial claims, the Belt and Road Initiative, and debt diplomacy.

As the route of international trade, this region is critical since most connectivity lines pass through it. Therefore, its openness, freedom, and inclusivity is essential for global trade and hold particular importance for Indian maritime security. The primary concern now is that ASEAN, as an established regional organization, has a larger and more significant role to play. However, its limited focus and silence on major regional issues have sparked debates about ASEAN's centrality and its role in the contemporary geopolitical situation. An in-depth study on ASEAN centrality is desirable.

This research is significant from Indian perspective, offering a new angle to view the situation, and new data, analyzation on previous data, drawing of new pattern and analysis of previous patterns help to build new concept on India-ASEAN relations which will help researchers in their future study and the main focus of the study is to make research insightful.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE EXISTING KNOWLEDGE

An ample of research and debates has been done on India-ASEAN relations and ASEAN centrality but the emerging concern for the question of its centrality and problems within ASEAN is not much explored in context of India and the concept as a whole. Hence this topic has been chosen to add to the existing knowledge in this field. The study will contribute to the scholarly discourse by analyzing the challenges and opportunities in India-ASEAN relations in reference to the geopolitical, economic, and cultural interactions in the Indo-Pacific Region. It will also explore the principle of ASEAN centrality from India's perspective in the present economic and geopolitical contexts. Additionally, the research will shed light on the potential of regional cooperation in the

areas like trade, infrastructure development, and cultural exchanges. By integrating both historical context and contemporary policy shifts, this work will provide an understanding of how India can influence ASEAN's policies while encouraging a deeper regional integration with the ASEAN countries. In this way, this study will enhance the current body of knowledge on India-ASEAN relations and the significance of ASEAN centrality for strengthening India's position in the Indo-Pacific region.

FUTURE WORK

The evolving dynamics of India-ASEAN relations and the concept of ASEAN centrality require continuous study to assess their long-term implications. This study may help and inspire other researchers to conduct their further researches. The concerns which are not addressed here on the various aspects of India-South East Asia relations can be taken up for further research works. The research is involved to find the challenges and potentials of India-ASEAN relations and the core concept of ASEAN Centrality is given an Indian angle. So, with the general and specific study of India-ASEAN Relations, this study can help future researchers to holistically understand the principle of ASEAN Centrality. The relevant data on various aspects can be used to continue the future work. The study can provide an Indian angle to see ASEAN and its relations with India. Primary and secondary data that have been used in the study, can further help researchers to use and refer these in their respective studies.

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Signature and approval of the Supervisor